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ABSTRACT

Psychological research has demonstrated that violence is learned, and it has identified some factors that put children at risk of perpetrating or being victimized by violence. Because aggression is often learned at an early age, prevention programs that start early in childhood and continue throughout adolescence have the best chance for success. Some children demonstrate resilience, almost from birth, that protects them from becoming violent or that makes them less vulnerable to the effects of violence. Psychological research suggests that resilience can be cultivated by early experiences that counter the negative effects of violence. These experiences, which include positive role models and events that develop self-esteem and hope for the future, promote a sense that one is in control of one's own life and can cope with whatever may happen. Research has indicated that exposure to televised violence is one of the significant causes of violence in our society. Exposure through television is but one of the ways violence is taught, but in any case, the process by which violence is taught is circular, beginning with the family and coming home to the next generation. Youth violence prevention programs must start early, educate parents and other caregivers, consider the spectrum of antisocial behavior, and include numerous components of the child's environment. (Contains 14 references.) (SLD)

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CLARIFYING THE DEBATE:

Psychology Examines the Issues

Is Youth Violence Just Another Fact of Life?

ED 411 331

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APA

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Some Kids Resilient; Some Kids at Risk

Are some children just prone to violence?

There is no gene for violence. Violence is a learned behavior, and it is often learned in the home or the community from parents, family members, or friends. Children are more aggressive and grow up more likely to become involved in violence—either as a victimizer or as a victim—if they witness violent acts.

The home is the most fertile breeding place for this situation. A major example: A child who sees a parent or other family member abused is more likely to see violence as a way to solve problems and subsequently be more likely to abuse others.

However, studies do suggest there is a connection between violent behavior and some inherited traits. Research has shown that impulsivity, learning difficulties, low IQ, or fearlessness can make someone prone to violence.

Additionally, rates of violence vary in all groups, but are highest among males.

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What do we know about preventing violence in children who seem most vulnerable?

Psychological research has not only demonstrated that violence is learned. It has also identified the factors that put children at the greatest risk of perpetrating or being victimized by violence, along with the prevention and intervention programs that work.

Aggression is often learned at an early age. In fact, according to *Reason to Hope*, the 1994 report by the APA Commission on Violence and Youth, it is possible to predict from an eight-year-old's aggressive behavior in school how aggressive that child will be in adolescence and adulthood—including whether he or she will exhibit criminal and antisocial behavior. **This is why prevention programs that start early in childhood and continue throughout adolescence have the best chance for success.**

(Ideally, the prevention program should even begin before birth; proper pre- and postnatal care can reduce the risk of birth defects that could cause learning difficulties, one reason a child may be susceptible to violent behavior.)

The prevention plan must encompass myriad components of the child's environment, including family members, teachers, peer groups, and media.

Effective violence prevention and intervention programs also share three primary characteristics:

- The programs zero in on developmental and sociocultural risk factors that often lead to violence.

- The programs use theory-based intervention strategies with proven track records. (These measures are generally less costly and far more effective than building more jails.)

- The programs sustain their preventive approach over time.

There are methods that can achieve enduring effects:

- The High/Scope Perry Preschool Program, designed to help 3–4-year-olds at risk for failing school, included a 2-year

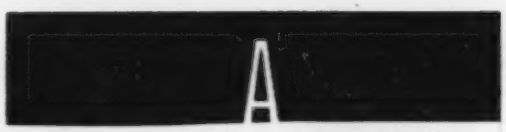
classroom program and weekly teacher home visits. At age 19, fewer youth who had participated in the program had come to the attention of juvenile authorities or had been arrested. Participants also showed greater literacy, higher employment levels, and greater attendance at college or vocational school.

■ Providing young parents help in dealing with stress has shown promise in preventing later aggressive and antisocial behaviors by their children. In one study, the children of a group of parents who received help for 2½ years—including assistance with finances and housing expenses, day care, and pediatric exams for their kids—attended school more, required fewer special services and were rated more positively by their teachers. The children of the parent group that didn't receive assistance were more likely to stay out all night without their mother's knowledge, were cruel to animals, and exhibited aggressive behavior toward their siblings and parents.

What keeps some children raised in violent circumstances themselves from becoming violent?

Some children demonstrate a resiliency, almost from birth, that protects them from becoming violent or that makes them less vulnerable to the effects of violence. Psychological research suggests that resilience can also come from early experiences that counter the negative effects of violence. These experiences include:

- Positive role models; exposure to a greater number of positive than negative behaviors.
- Development of self-esteem and self-efficacy.
- Supportive relationships, including those with teachers and friends.
- Sense of hope about the future.
- Belief in oneself.
- Strong social skills.
- Good peer relationships.
- A close, trusting bond with a nurturing adult outside the family.
- Great empathy and support from the mother or mother figure.
- The ability to find refuge and a sense of self-esteem in hobbies and creative pursuits, useful work, and assigned chores.
- The sense that one is in control of one's life and can cope with whatever happens.



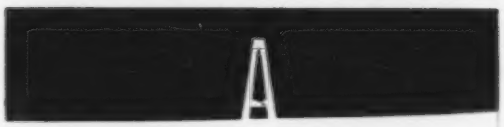
A 17-year-old girl has attended the funerals of 16 murdered friends and classmates in the past two years.

The Youth Violence Epidemic

How soon do we need answers?

Now is the time to take action. Some people mistakenly believe that violence in the United States is on the downswing because crime overall has decreased since its peak year in 1981. But much of the decrease in crime has been due to the aging of the baby boom generation and the consequent reduction in the number of teenagers; it is this demographic group that contributes disproportionately to crime in general.

In addition, violent crime is up, especially among juveniles, and this trend is likely to continue. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention reports that between 1985 and 1994, there was a 40 percent increase in murders, rapes, robberies, and assaults reported to law enforcement agencies across the nation. And despite their relatively low numbers in the population, our youth were responsible for 26 percent of this growth in violence.



According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the years between 1985 and 1995 saw a 249 percent increase in gun-related murders committed by juveniles. (By the year 1992, when murder became the second leading cause of death among males 15–24 in the United States, three-quarters of the killings already involved guns.) Indeed, for black and white older adolescents, firearm murders are the most rapidly increasing cause of death.

In 1994 alone, for example, juveniles were responsible for 14 percent of all violent crimes solved by the law enforcement system. They committed:

- 20 percent of robberies
- 14 percent of rapes
- 13 percent of assaults
- 10 percent of murders

Thus, even if arrest rates recorded in 1992 remain constant, we could still see a 22 percent increase in violence arrests for youth age 10–17 until the year 2010. **This rise equals the projected growth in the juvenile population as the baby-boomers' children start approaching and growing into their teen years.**

Worse, the National Center for Juvenile Justice reports that the number of youth age 10–17 who are arrested for violent crimes

could more than double by the year 2010 if arrest rates continue to increase as they did between 1983 and 1992.

This projected growth between 1992 and 2010 is expected to vary among categories, as follows:

- Murders + 142 percent
- Rapes + 66 percent
- Robberies + 58 percent
- Assault + 129 percent

In addition, patterns of behavior established in childhood and early adolescence not only wreak their own havoc, but are the foundation for lifelong patterns manifested in adulthood.

Who is most likely to be a victim of violence?

Statistics on victims of violent crime show that juveniles between the ages of 12 and 17 are more likely to encounter violence than any other age group except young adults age 18–24. (Senior citizens, by contrast, are the least likely group to be victims of violent crime.)

Youth victimization is not only threatening to the victim but also to U.S. society for another reason: **The experience of being victimized by crime has been found to increase certain people's inclination for perpetrating violence, juvenile crime, adult criminality, and adult violence toward family members.** Reducing victimization of youth can therefore also reduce youth violence.

Black youth, along with recent Asian immigrants and gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth also run a greater risk for being victims of violence stemming from "hate crimes."

"In some areas of the country, it is now more likely for a black male between 15 and 25 to die from homicide than it was for a United States soldier to be killed on a tour of duty in Vietnam." *New York Times*, December 7, 1990.

Rates of victimization for young Hispanics are slightly lower than those for black and higher than those for white youth.

Regardless of race or cultural group, violence is most prevalent among the poor. Thus, although violence in nonurban areas is increasing, children in poor, unstable neighborhoods are more likely to be assaulted than their counterparts in affluent or stable suburbs.

The ultimate violence is murder. Homicide has been the leading cause of death among African Americans age 15–34 since 1978. The lifetime risk of violent death for young black males is 1 in 27 and for black females, 1 in 17. By contrast, 1 in 205 young white males and 1 in 496 white females are murdered.

How pervasive is gang violence?

Only a small percentage of youth join delinquent gangs, and relatively few gang members engage in violence. Nonetheless, in 3 out of 4 cases of murder and assault committed by youth, the perpetrators are likely to be gang members.

In the 70s and 80s, gang violence increased substantially in both level and type of violence in the United States. Gangs now operate in all 50 states and in suburbia as well as the inner city. A survey of 35 cities in 1989 reported a total of 1,439 gangs; the estimate today has leapt to about 2,000 gangs, with as many as 200,000 members.

Until the 1970s, most gang members were 12–21 years old; today they can be anywhere as young as 9 or as old as 30. The younger and older gang members reflect the increase of gang involvement in drugs. Male gang members outnumber females 15 to 1, but the gender gap is slowly narrowing.

Today's gang violence is deadlier than in the 1950s, when "turf tiffs" were usually settled with switchblades or chains. Today, weapons of choice are AK-47s or Uzis, and drive-by shootings have replaced schoolyard rumbles.

Does TV really intensify violent behavior?

After review of hundreds of research findings, three major national studies have concluded that heavy exposure to televised violence is one of the significant causes of violence in society:

- The Surgeon General's Commission Report (1972).
- The National Institute of Mental Health Ten-Year Follow-up (1982).
- The report of the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Television in Society (1992).

Viewing violence on the screen has the following negative effects:

- It increases the viewer's fear of becoming a victim of violence, with a resultant increase in self-protective behaviors and increased mistrust of others.
- It desensitizes the viewer to violence, resulting in a calloused attitude toward violence directed at others and a decreased likelihood of taking action to help a victim of violence.
- It increases the viewer's appetite for becoming involved with violence.
- It often demonstrates how desirable commodities can be obtained through the use of aggression and violence.
- Sexual violence in X- and R-rated videotapes widely available to teenagers has also been shown to cause an increase in male aggression against females.

These effects are both short term and long lasting. A longitudinal study of boys found a significant relation between exposure to TV violence at 8 years of age and antisocial acts—including serious violent criminal offenses and spouse abuse—22 years later.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The process by which violence is taught is circular: It begins in the family, expanding through the culture of the larger society in which a child grows and matures and then again is reinforced or discouraged in the family.

The search for ways to help children learn more appropriate behaviors (i.e., nonviolent responses to life stressors) requires a close look at institutional practices, public policies, and media programming that perpetuate violent attitudes, images, and behaviors.

When parents demean and strike each other or their children, when children are encouraged to be bullies or fight back on the playground, and when they have easy access to real or toy guns and other weapons, violence is being taught.

When stereotypes and prejudice frame interactions with people who are different from ourselves, the scene is being set for violence. Glorifying war and relishing violence in competitive sports may reinforce violent behavior.

When violence and sexual aggression are combined in the media, in song lyrics, in multimedia computer games, and in the vernacular, the message of violence (including sexual assault) is reinforced.

"Rather than waiting until violence has been learned and practiced and then devoting increased resources to hiring policemen, building more prisons, and sentencing three-time offenders to life imprisonment, it would be more effective to redirect the resources to early violence prevention programs, particularly for young children and preadolescents," points out the APA Commission on Violence and Youth.

By contrast, we reduce the chance of violence in our youth when we give them the ability to arrive at nonviolent solutions to problems by teaching them skills such as:

- Problem-solving
- Stress management
- Assertiveness
- Anger control
- Impulse control

Parent training and support. Head Start and school-based programs, peer mentoring and support programs, individual and family counseling and therapy, and community-based programs appear to work best.

In summary, to be effective, youth violence prevention and intervention programs must:

- Start as early as possible.
- Educate parents and other caregivers in prevention strategies. Teaching parents effective, nonviolent coping skills is critical in any intervention program.
- Address aggression as part of a constellation of antisocial behavior in a child.
- Include numerous components of the child's environment.

A generation of Americans is at risk. We must make a legislative and social commitment to the reduction of aggression and violence in society. Everyone who comes into contact with a youth—parents, educators, child care providers, health care providers—has the potential, one way or another, to mitigate a child's involvement with violent behavior. Every institution that touches that child can contribute positively to a child's sense of safety by teaching and demonstrating peaceful, effective coping alternatives to violence.

Resources spent on positive learning and social opportunities in the lives of young children add up to dollars that we don't have to spend, sooner or later, on public safety and punishment programs. Public policy makers should be guided by this information.

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